

Laden is still alive and planning fresh attack?

AFP, London

Suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden is alive and well and planning new attacks, his al-Qaida network has warned in a statement published here.

The Arab daily al-Hayat said in its Tuesday edition that it had received a statement from al-Qaida, dated March 26, claiming that 18 US troops had been killed after being taken prisoner by forces of the ousted Taliban regime during fierce fighting in eastern Afghanistan.

"Osama bin Laden is safe and in good health and preparing the next steps of his battle," the statement said.

US President George W. Bush admitted in a television interview Friday that he had "no idea" if bin Laden, the world's most sought-after terror suspect, was dead or alive.

'Fight against terror to inevitably impinge HR'

AFP, Weimar

Human rights will inevitably become a victim in the fight against terrorism, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned here late Tuesday.

"I do not share the opinion that the fight against terrorism is possible without Human Rights being affected," said Putin, appearing on German ARD television along with his host Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder following a summit meeting here.

Putin's comments concerned Western criticism of Russia's military operation in the breakaway republic of Chechnya, which he termed "an anti-terrorist operation".

UNSC defers vote on new ME resolution

AFP, United Nations

A divided Security Council decided Tuesday to postpone a vote on a new resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis until after US Secretary of State Colin Powell and other mediators meet in Madrid.

Powell is due to meet Wednesday with other members of the so-called peace "quartet" — United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and top European Union officials.

But whatever the outcome of the Madrid meeting, a clash looked inevitable in the Security Council on how to get Israel to comply with the council's demands that it withdraw its forces from the West Bank.

Militants kill 5 in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Islamic militants killed five Muslims, including three children, in an attack on the house of an alleged informer in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said Wednesday.

A police spokesman said the militants attacked the house of Noor Gujjar late Tuesday night in Doda district, 180 kilometres (110 miles) north of Jammu, Kashmir's winter capital.

"They were searching for Noor Gujjar but he was not in the house," the spokesman said.

Schools reopen in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Schools in the Indian capital reopened Wednesday, deepening the transport crisis that forced their closure two days ago as thousands of diesel buses remained off the roads in accordance with a Supreme Court ban.

The schools had been closed Monday and Tuesday as the New Delhi authorities sought to ease commuter bottlenecks following the withdrawal of around 6,000 buses — or more than half the city's total fleet.

Y'slav gov't adopts war crimes bill

AFP, Belgrade

Facing the threat of international sanctions, the Yugoslav government late Tuesday approved a bill that would allow war crimes suspects to be handed over to the UN tribunal in The Hague.

The draft on cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) will be debated in parliament on Wednesday, the government announced in a statement.

US, UN, EU, Russia call for an end to Israeli offensive

Israel to fight to the finish: Sharon

AFP, Madrid

An international diplomatic quartet of the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia on Wednesday urged Israel "to halt immediately" military operations in the Palestinian territories.

UN chief Kofi Annan said after talks between the four sides that they had agreed on a statement calling for an end to violence and terror from all sides and for "Israel to halt immediately its military operations."

"We call on Chairman Arafat as the recognised elected leader of the Palestinian people to undertake immediately the maximum possible effort to stop terror attacks against innocent Israelis," he quoted the statement as saying.

Annan was speaking at a press conference held with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique.

"We call on Israel and the Palestinian Authority to reach agreement on ceasefire proposals put forward by General (Anthony) Zinni without further delay," the statement added.

It also urged immediate application of UN resolutions 1402 and 1403

calling for a ceasefire and an end to violence and attacks, he said.

The four sides stressed that there must be an end to firing across the Lebanese border which threatened to extend the conflict.

"We express our grave concern about the most recent attacks from Lebanon across the UN determined blue line," the statement said.

The UN chief stressed before reading the joint statement that he was "frankly appalled" by the humanitarian crisis caused in the Palestinian territories by the Israeli offensive.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed Tuesday that Israel will fight the Palestinians to the finish after 13 soldiers were killed in an epic battle at a West Bank refugee camp.

Facing Israel's biggest one-day army loss since the Palestinian uprising erupted 18 months ago, the former general defied US calls to pull back his troops and said they would keep up their West Bank assault.

"This battle is a battle for the survival of the Jewish people and the state of Israel," public radio quoted Sharon as saying.

The dramatic events darkened hopes for the peace mission of US Secretary of State Colin Powell, on the second day of a tour aimed at keeping the conflict from erupting into a regional war.

Serbia-Montenegro nation gets go ahead by Y'slavia

AFP, Belgrade

The federal Yugoslav government late Tuesday approved an accord that will replace federal Yugoslavia with a new country called "Serbia and Montenegro," the government information service announced.

The government "examined and adopted" the accord and passed it on to the federal parliament with a request it be urgently approved.

Earlier Tuesday the parliaments of both Serbia and Montenegro, the two republics making up federal Yugoslavia, approved the accord.

Under the accord, the two republics will remain in a union, maintaining their local parliaments and alternating representatives between them at the United Nations, the Council of Europe and

other international organisations.

Serbian deputies ratified the accord by a vote of 146 to 79 following a week-long debate, while the parliament in the Montenegrin capital of Podgorica backed the agreement by 58 votes to 11 after two weeks of discussions.

Signed on March 14 by the leaders of Yugoslavia, Serbia and Montenegro, the accord provides for the creation for at least three years of a state called "Serbia and Montenegro" to replace Yugoslavia.

The parliaments of Serbia, Montenegro and the federation had to ratify the accord before a commission can be set up to draft a constitution for the new state.

Kashmir CM blames Pakistan for killings

AFP, Srinagar

The chief minister of Indian Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, said Wednesday that a recent spurt in separatist killings proved that Pakistan was continuing to support Muslim militant groups in the region.

"Pakistani claims of having stopped support to the militants is mere eye-wash and aimed at hoodwinking world opinion," Abdullah said in a press statement.

Abdullah alleged the massacre of seven Hindus in the southern Kashmiri district of Udhampur on Monday was carried-out by militants at the behest of "perpetrators of violence from across the border."

Abdullah has repeatedly called for Indian military strikes on alleged militant training camps in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

India and Pakistan have amassed some 800,000 troops along their common border following an attack on the Indian parliament in December last year which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based militant groups.

Despite a crackdown on extremist groups by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, India insists Islamabad has not done enough to warrant a troop pull-back.

"The reality is that militants are still being pushed into our area by Pakistan," Abdullah said.



(From L to R) Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Igor Ivanov, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister Josep Pique, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and EU High Policy Chief Spaniard Javier Solana, start their talks at La Moncloa Palace, outside Madrid on Wednesday. Representatives from the UN, USA, Russia and EU are meeting here for talks on the troubled situation in the Middle East.

Gulf Arabs' cash, moral support soar for Palestinians

AFP, Dubai

Financial and political support for the Palestinians has soared to unprecedented levels in the Gulf monarchies as tens of millions of dollars donated for urgent relief match strong words and rare street demonstrations.

Saudi Arabia, after watching its peace initiative go up in the flames of an Israeli assault on Palestinian strongholds and a wave of suicide bombings, has led the campaign to push the United States to rein in the Jewish state.

Despite a ban on demonstrations, the kingdom's 20-million population will also undoubtedly head the donation league after a

telethon fundraiser on Thursday.

King Fahd, Crown Prince Abdullah and Defence Minister Prince Sultan have together already donated 4.8 million dollars to launch the event.

Dubai, with a population of barely one million, showed the way Wednesday raising more than 36 million dollars in aid for the Palestinians, including huge sums donated by sheikhs, kilos of gold and even one child's pocket money.

Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum urged the United Nations to approve the use of force to halt Israel's "butchery" of Palestinians as it has done to save other threatened populations.

And he launched Dubai's "We are all Palestine" campaign, gifting 20 million dirhams (5.4 million dollars).

That was topped by ruler Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum who shelled out 30 million dirhams (8.2 million dollars) during a telethon overnight Tuesday-Wednesday. Deputy ruler Sheikh Hamdan chipped in 20 million dirhams.

Dubai's affluent trading families stumped up millions more while many women phoned in to pledge their gold, one giving all her wedding jewellery and another her Rolls Royce. Both asked to remain anonymous.



Investigators inspect an Israeli bus following a suicide bomb attack near Yagur junction east of Haifa in northern Israel on Wednesday. The military wing of the Palestinian Islamist Hamas movement claimed responsibility for the suicide attack, which killed nine people and injured 20 others.

3 killed in Hindu-Muslim clashes near Bombay

Curfews lifted in Gujarat

AFP, Bombay

Three people, including two women, were killed in overnight violence between Hindus and Muslims near the western Indian commercial hub of Bombay, police said Wednesday.

The incident took place around midnight (1830 GMT Tuesday) in the Bazarpath market area in Kalyan district, 25 kilometres from Bombay, police said.

A Kalyan police official told AFP the violence appeared to have been triggered by a fight between a Hindu cobbler and the Muslim driver of a horse-drawn cart.

The altercation set off a bout of mob violence between the two communities, during which three people — two women and a man — were killed "probably due to stabbing," the official said.

Police fired in the air to disperse the mobs and a curfew was imposed

in the area.

Eight policemen were injured when the crowd pelted them with stones and police said around nine shops had been burned.

Kripa Shankar Singh, the home minister of Maharashtra state, of which Bombay is the capital, insisted that the violence was the result of a private dispute and the situation had swiftly been brought under control.

"This is not a case of communal violence," he said.

In neighbouring Gujarat state, around 750 people, mostly Muslims, have been killed in more than month-long clashes between Hindus and Muslims, triggered by the massacre of 58 Hindu pilgrims by a Muslim-led mob at the end of February.

Communally-sensitive Bombay was rocked by a string of riots in 1992 and 1993 soon after Hindu

mobs demolished a mosque in northern India which they claim was built on the site of a temple.

Meanwhile, curfews were lifted in parts of India's riot-torn Gujarat state on Wednesday, despite isolated incidents of sectarian violence in the commercial capital Ahmedabad.

"We have been relaxing curfew hours as conditions are returning back to normal. Markets have opened," said Police Superintendent Raju Bhargava.

Three empty houses were burned down in the eastern part of Ahmedabad early in the morning, senior fire officials said, adding there were no reports of any casualties.

Moreover, a doctor was stabbed and injured in a predominantly Muslim southern district of the city late Tuesday.

Stem cells used in operation on heart patient

AFP, Newcastle

An Australian man has undergone an operation using adult stem cells in a world-first trial to repair his damaged heart, Australian researchers announced Wednesday.

Jim Nichol, 74, had already had three heart bypass operations when doctors at the John Hunter Hospital in the New South Wales city of Newcastle decided to try to save his life with stem cells.

Cardiologist Suku Thambar of the Hunter Medical Research Institute said it was the first ever clinical trial of a procedure that doctors hope could help almost a third of all patients with end stage coronary artery disease.

Bush presses Senate for cloning ban

AP, Washington

President Bush is pressing the Senate to approve a total ban on human cloning that would outlaw the duplication of human beings and of cells that could be used for research and treatment of diseases.

Bush long has opposed human cloning. When he announced his decision in August to restrict but not forbid federal financing of so-called embryonic stem cell research, he said: "We recoil at the idea of growing human beings for spare body parts or creating life for our convenience."

On Wednesday, Bush was speaking to 175 doctors, scientists, lawmakers, religious activists and disabled people to mobilize bipartisan support behind a complete ban on cloning. Aides said Bush's speech would be "reflective" on the ethical issues that cloning poses.

US envoy holds talks with Indian officials

AFP, New Delhi

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christina Rocca, met Wednesday with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh amid the backdrop of a military standoff between India and Pakistan.

Rocca arrived in New Delhi on Tuesday after holding talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in Islamabad.

India and Pakistan have massed some 800,000 troops in battle formations along their common border since a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based Islamic militants.

Rocca also held talks with

Foreign Secretary Chokila Iyer, Joint Secretary for the Americas Jayant Prasad and India's special envoy to Afghanistan, S.K. Lambah.

Indian officials have downplayed Rocca's visit, saying it was routine and not intended for mediation between the nuclear-armed South Asian powers.

India has ruled out easing the military build-up until Pakistan takes action on a list of 20 militants in the country and completely halts infiltration of separatist guerrillas over the disputed border in Kashmir.

Pakistan says it has already taken strong action against extremists, including banning the two groups allegedly responsible for the parliament attack.



US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca leaves the External Affairs Ministry after meeting with External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in New Delhi on Wednesday. Rocca is in India for a two-day official visit expected to include discussion of the military tensions between India and Pakistan.